Stephen Linton - Prepared Testimony

"Promoting Religious Freedom in North Korea": Dr. Stephen Linton Prepared Testimony

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First
of all I would like to thank the Committee on International Religious Freedom for inviting me to testify here today. As someone who has been working with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea for most of my adult life, I am encouraged when official attention focuses on North Korea even under the most trying circumstances. Why? Because the more American policy makers think about North Korea, the sooner peace finally will come to the Korean Peninsula.

My great grandfather, great grandmother and father are all buried in Korea. This is probably the first time in the four generations our family has been in Korea that someone has been asked to testify at an official hearing. Our family's absence of contact with the American government was not without reason. As conservative and evangelical Southern Presbyterian missionaries, my ancestors believed that missionaries should avoid involving themselves in the politics of their host countries and the policies of the US government towards them. Not being a missionary myself, I do not labor under the same constraints but feel the weight of that tradition as I testify here today.

Our family has been in Korea since 1895, and has worked there under a variety of governments: the last decades of the 19th Century and the Yi Dynasty (Korea's last monarchy), the Japanese colonial government in the first half of the 20th Century, and every administration of the Republic of Korea since its founding. I have been actively engaged with North Korea as a researcher, professor, consultant, and humanitarian aid worker since my first visit in 1979. All total, I and have visited North Korea about fifty times. Once I was introduced as a speaker to a military audience as "the American who has visited North Korea more than anyone else, other than a SR 71 pilot." Whether this is true or not, studying and working with North Korea has been my life's focus for more than three decades. Having said all this by way of introduction, I would like to make it clear to this Committee that, while I consider myself a 'student of North Korea,' in no way am I an 'expert on North Korea.' North Korean society is far too complex and opaque, a fact that seems to confront one far more often 'on the ground in country' than it does in the library.

In this testimony I have tried to keep

these limitations in mind. I will only attempt to provide a) a rough sketch of the roots of North Korea's attitude towards religion, b) a brief summary of the role of religion in North Korea in recent history, and c) end with several suggestions on how American policy might best promote religious freedom there today. Though the first two sections are somewhat longer than I would have liked, I ask your forbearance. Why? Because an understanding of the place of religion in traditional Korean society and the role religion has played in North Korea are essential to the quest for an effective US policy for promoting religious freedom.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF NORTH KOREA'S POLICY TOWARD RELIGION

When the Roman Empire fell, the church at Rome absorbed many functions formerly belonging to the state. Gradually over time, new European nation-states developed. As secular powers consolidated their power, they often competed with religious institutions for legitimacy and power. Through a long and often bloody historical process, European civilization developed compromises between sacred and secular authority. The American Constitution formally rejected formal linkages between church and state and institutionalized a separation of church and state.

In contrast to the West, rarely in East Asia have religious institutions posed a significant threat to state legitimacy or power. For the most part, the state has dominated religious institutions, using them to endorse the ruler's legitimacy and support official policy. When religion did threaten the state in East Asia, it was almost always in support of rebellion against the monarch. For this reason, heterodoxy and treason have not always been clearly defined. The notion of a separation between church and state did not appear in East Asia until very recent history. Even today, most modern East Asian governments assert far more control over religious institutions than would be accepted in the West. East Asian societies, for the most part, still expect religious institutions to adhere to their traditional role of active support for the state.

Religious Freedom under Korea's Last Monarchy

Recent Korean history reflects the profound difference between East Asia's traditional roles for religion when compared to modern European and American expectations. When Catholic missionaries first reached Korea in the 18th Century, Confucianism had been both the religion and ideology of the state for centuries. Yi Dynasty Confucianism was not only a philosophical and ethical system but also a cult of the family. Everyone was expected to show filial piety towards their parents, ancestors and the king. Participation in family sacrifices helped link the individual to the monarch, who was considered the 'father' of the national community. Traditional Korea, in other words, was a 'Family-State' that equated loyalty to the king (patriotism) with filial piety.

Because Confucian rites were both religious and political, Korea's first Christians were severely persecuted for burning their ancestral tablets and refusing to participate in family rites, a crime considered

treasonous as well as irreligious. Many Korean believers and missionaries were martyred and the Catholic Church was driven underground. A French expedition to Korea to 'punish' it for persecuting Catholics only made matters worse. Largely because of this wrong-headed attempt to promote religious freedom, suspicion that Catholics, with their institutional ties to Rome, were a potential threat to state sovereignty fanned the flames of Korean xenophobia. Not until Catholic nations established peaceful relations with Korea did Korean Catholics began to enjoy a measure of safety from persecution.

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American Protestant missionaries who flocked to Korea during the last decades of the 19th Century were far more fortunate than the Catholic missionaries who had smuggled themselves into Korea a century earlier. The primary reason they were tolerated was because the United States had established diplomatic relations with Korea before the missionaries arrived.

Instead of trying to promote religious freedom from the outside, American diplomats stationed in Seoul (one of whom was a missionary) worked to expand opportunities for ordinary American citizens to engage in peaceful pursuits in Korea. Initially limited to the capital city of Seoul, missionaries gradually won the right to reside in the countryside. Even when anti-foreign feeling exploded in the Tonghak (Eastern Learning) Movement, a peasant revolt that almost toppled the dynasty, the US government did not send troops to Korea as it had done elsewhere. Initially, missionaries were forced to withdraw to Seoul but as xenophobia gradually subsided, they were able to return to the countryside to resume their work. Over time, missionaries and their Korean converts won the right to practice their faith in peace because they won the trust of local populations by building schools and hospitals as well as churches. Most successful were those who strictly avoided involvement in Korea's political life or even their own country's policy towards Korea.

Religious Freedom under Japanese Colonialism

Japan reduced Korea to its protectorate in 1905 and its colony in 1910. Under colonial rule, Koreans were exposed to a relationship between religion and the state quite different from what they had learned from American missionaries. The Japanese gave official support to Buddhism in an attempt to use it as a counterweight to the rapidly growing Christian church. They also established Shinto as the official state religion.

In the name of modernization, the public school curriculum was overhauled to reflect Japanese values and sensibilities and to teach Korean students loyalty to the Japanese royal family. School children in Korea were required to pay homage to Shinto shrines built to venerate the divine ancestors of the Japanese Imperial family. The purpose of mandatory shrine worship was clear: to make Japan and its imperial house the center of a new East Asian empire with Shinto as the official state religion. Imperial Japan adopted many western practices

and policies but remained committed to a traditional East Asian view of the relationship between religion and the state.

Christianity grew rapidly during the early part of the Japanese Empire. Koreans flocked to church for social as well as spiritual reasons. Bitterly disillusioned at their loss of national sovereignty, many Koreans blamed Confucianism for an isolationist policy that rejected modern reforms, leaving Korea too weak to defend itself against rapacious foreign powers. Because they suffered racial discrimination at the hands of the Japanese, Koreans were also attracted to a 'spiritual kingdom' that afforded Koreans the same rights and privileges as the adherents from other races. Koreans also saw Christianity as a way of expressing resistance to Japan. Identifying with the tribulations of the Jewish people of the Old Testament, Koreans found meaning in their suffering and hope that the Bible's promise of redemption might apply to Korea as a nation as well as to Koreans as individuals.

During the first decades of the occupation Japanese colonial authorities tried to discourage the spread of Christianity. Persecutions grew more intense as Japan moved toward war in the 1930's. Japanese administrators gradually tightened their control over religious institutions until all public worship that did not affirm the legitimacy of the colonial government and promote patriotism was banned. Japanese policies also split the Christian community, bringing an era of relative harmony between missionary societies to an end.

Mandatory participation in Shinto shrine rites divided the mission community. Insisting that Shinto rites were patriotic duties rather than a religious worship, Japanese authorities made Shinto shrine attendance mandatory. When children attending mission schools were forced to go to the shrines, most liberal churchmen favored cooperating with the authorities to keep the schools open. Conservative evangelical missionaries, however, closed their schools in the teeth of opposition. A number of Korean Christians who refused to bow to the symbols of Japan's imperial family were convicted of treason and martyred. Their sacrifice inspired others to continue the struggle against Japan. By the late 1930's missionary activities were subscribed to such an extent that most abandoned the field before the outbreak of the Second World War. To make control of Christian churches easier, Japan forced all Protestant denominations to merge and placed all religious activities under strict surveillance by the police. By the end of the Second World War, religious leaders of all faiths either publicly supported Japan or faced imprisonment.

Imperial Japan, thus, was able to roll back the clock on religious freedom and force religion to support state legitimacy and power. Even while colonial rule introduced some modern reforms to the Korean Peninsula, religious freedom lost ground under the Japanese. After almost a half-century of Japanese domination, Korean believers were far less free to express their religious faith than they had been almost a half-century before. With the liberation of Korea from Japanese

control, the two halves of Korea moved in two radically different directions concerning the relationship between religion and the state. American occupational authorities promoted religious freedom and encouraged the newly-formed Republic of Korea to institutionalize a separation between church and state. By contrast, in the northern half of the Korean peninsula, the Japanese colonial administration was replaced with a communist government with a radically different view of religion.

RELIGION AND THE STATE IN NORTH KOREA

North Korea's policy toward religion and religious believers derives from four major influences: a) Marx-Leninism, b) traditional culture, c) Japanese colonialism, and e) Kim Il Sung's own Protestant Christian background.

Marxist Influence

From Marx-Leninism, North Korea inherited a deep prejudice against all religions. Calling any belief in the supernatural 'superstition' they have worked to instill a more 'progressive' worldview among the general population. Marxist anti-religious sentiment has been modified by the other three influences on North Korea and its leadership.

Traditional Influence

Books on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have tended to overlook North Korea's deep roots in traditional Korean society. But when North Korea today is compared to Korea's last monarchy of the 19th Century, striking similarities emerge. Here are but a few. Like the Yi Dynasty, North Korea too is a 'Family State' under a paternalistic leader. North Korean students memorize Kim Il Sung's works just as their ancestors memorized the Confucian classics. Kim Il Sung's "Juche" (self-reliant) Philosophy plays a role in North Korea's political life similar to the role Confucianism played in traditional Korea while his cult of leadership has taken on many characteristics of Confucian religious rites a century ago. North Korea's anti-foreign rhetoric echoes the slogans of the Tonghak (Eastern Learning) Movement of the last century. North Korea's passion for its version of socialist orthodoxy mirrors Yi Dynasty Korea's passion for Confucian orthodoxy. In the past, Koreans criticized China for abandoning Confucianism. Today, North Korea criticizes China for abandoning 'socialism.'

Colonial Influence

During the first half of Kim Il Sung's life, Korea was a colony of Japan. As much as North Korea's founder hated Japan, he was also impressed by Imperial Japan's use of the Shinto religion to inculcate absolute loyalty in its subjects. North Korea's cult of leadership plays a similar role in North Korean society today. Parallels in terminology are striking. The Japanese claimed their imperial line descended from the Sun Goddess while Kim Il Sung is called the "Sun of the Nation" and his birthday, celebrated on April 15, is called "Sun Day." Like Imperial Japan, moreover, North Korea has forced the merger of all Protestant denominations into one body and keeps religious

institutions under firm state control. Like Japan and the Yi Dynasty, North Korea's leader believed that the primary role of religious institutions was to support the state.

Much has been written about Kim Il Sung's own Protestant background. Although it is doubtful he was ever an active believer himself, his maternal grandfather was a Presbyterian elder and, according to his own witness, took him to church regularly. His autobiography even has a chapter dedicated to a Christian minister who managed to get him released from a Japanese prison, saving his life. While rejecting a Christian's reliance on faith and God's power to effect change in favor of armed revolution, Kim Il Sung recognized that religion is not all bad. Missionaries that resisted Shinto shrine attendance also made a positive impression on him and his associates.

Christian Influence

North Korea's cult of leadership has clear Christian antecedents. North Koreans are taught that Kim Il Sung's life was a turning point in Korean history. According to this claim, Kim Il Sung was the only Korean leader to stand up to big powers for centuries, reversing a long and shameful tradition of 'serving the great' and starting Korea forward toward its rightful place of honor in human history. Reflecting this new epoch, North Korea's official calendar dates time from his birth (1912) instead of the birth of Christ.

Rather than attempt to eliminate religion outright, Kim Il Sung sought to bend religion to his vision for building an ideal society, a policy that is still in force today. This policy is encapsulated in an oft quoted remark by Kim Il Sung. "It's OK for Koreans to believe in religion, so long as it is a Korean religion. It's OK for Koreans to believe in God, just so long as it is a Korean God."

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the obvious obstacles presented by ideology, tradition and history, many consider promoting western-style religious freedom in North Korea a hopeless cause. North Korea is the distilled essence of traditional Korean xenophobia. Its ideology, culture, and history all point to a firm conviction that religious institutions and their adherents are little more than the pawns of political forces. To make matters worse, North Korea has cast the United States as an 'evil empire' bent on its destruction. Since it was founded a half century ago, North Korea has been an enemy of America longer than any other nation in our history. Consequently, Americans are not well positioned to encourage North Korea to treat its religious peoplebetter. American calls for religious freedom and human rights have been met with more than the usual cynicism. Still, United States policy towards North Korea must reflect America's core values with respect to religious freedom. As outlined below, more sophisticated and nuanced policy is essential to be effective. Before exploring what might work, several ineffective approaches need to be mentioned first.

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An idea with potentially terrifying consequences that has re-surfaced since the terrorist attacks on September 11th, is to use American military power to force North Korea to change its policies on religious freedom and human rights. To implement such a policy in this part of the globe would be to risk world war and total destruction of the Korean Peninsula.

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Continuing to isolate North Korea and maintaining economic sanctions in hopes that North Korea's government will collapse is not only unwise but cruel. North Koreans believe that their economy is being strangled by US led sanctions, and that their survival as a society is at stake. Its government has already proven willing to sacrifice many lives to secure regime survival. North Korea's battered society is just beginning to emerge from years of unimaginable suffering - without a serious internal challenge to the state control. Unless sanctions are ended, those responsible for North Korea's troubling policies will continue to pass the cup of international censure to their innocent fellow countrymen.

In many ways, the quest for religious freedom faces the same challenges in North Korea today that it faced in 19th Century Korea. Unless the United States promotes religious freedom as a friend rather than an enemy, North Korea will likely turn further away from South Korea and the West, and seek relief from nations that would use its hungry, angry people to continue to threaten American interests in the region. What then are the alternatives?

1. Address North Korea's Legitimate Concerns

First, we must recognize that fear of the outside world is the primary motivating force for North Korea's aggressive behavior.

Not without justification does North Korea see itself as the last 'island' of socialism awash in a sea of capitalism. Abandoned by its former allies, its greatest enemy is the only remaining superpower. North Korea's arch rival, the Republic of Korea, has twice its population and 20 times its GNP.

North Korean paranoia, in other words, is in some sense justified. Only by creating an environment where North Korea'leaders feel less threatened will we challenge their policies that ever demand greater and greater sacrifices from ordinary citizens. South Korea, the nation that has the best reasons to hate North Korea and most to loose in a confrontation, has already recognized this logic. It is past time America adopted a similar policy. Rather than treating North Korea as simply one more 'terrorist state' to be intimidated into better behavior, American policy needs to pay more attention to removing the root causes of anti-Americanism before it turns violent again. This is, perhaps, the most important lesson of the terrible tragedy of September 11.

2. Remove Obstacles to Diplomatic Recognition

Secondly, America should drop most of its pre-conditions and move as quickly as practical toward some kind of diplomatic recognition of North Korea.

To add pressure for religious freedom to an already long list of pre-conditions for normalizing relations simply will not help. Without first establishing diplomatic representation in Pyongyang, efforts to modify North Korea's behavior toward its religious people are doomed to failure. As the French experience in the 19th Century proves, this would only make North Korea's government more hostile to religion and less likely to grant real religious freedoms. Not until the French established an official presence in Korea's capital were they able to encourage better treatment of Korean Catholics. Otherwise, America's sincere efforts to promote religious freedom will only give credence to the suspicion that religious believers are a real threat to the state, possibly sparking further persecution of North Korea's beleaguered religious communities.

As has been noted earlier, North Koreans are not only Marxist but also conservative East Asians. 'Face' is terribly important to them. Despite their blustering pronouncements in its official press, they are deeply troubled by the negative image of their nation in the international arena and go to great lengths to try to make good impressions on guests. This concern for image can only be harnessed to promote religious and other freedoms if foreigners are seriously engaged in North Korea.

3. Promote Non-Governmental Contacts

Thirdly, the United States government should be more active in promoting benign non-governmental contacts between American citizens and North Koreans.

'Benign' is the operative word. As history has already proven, ordinary Americans are America's greatest asset in building the bridges

needed for peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. Conversely, the lack of a policy promoting people-to-people contacts has been the greatest weakness in American policy toward North Korea for the last half century.

Evidence already exists that promoting benign non-governmental contacts promotes progress on religious issues. When North Korea issued a plea for humanitarian assistance in 1995, it initially treated non-governmental humanitarian aid representatives who responded with deep suspicion. After years of repeated contact, official attitudes towards faith-based organizations have mellowed significantly, particularly those that have sought to build bilateral relationships instead of joining in consortiums to pressure on North Korea. Over the past few years, North Korea's public has grown far less fearful and far friendlier to foreigners engaged in humanitarian work. Organizations that have taken the time to build trust and mutual respect enjoy greater access and are even permitted to dedicate their donations with religious ceremonies led by ordained religious leaders from abroad. In short, key to religious freedom is long-term engagement by ordinary Americans.

4. Make Divided Families a Front-burner Issue

Fourthly, America needs an aggressive policy to promote the rights of US citizens who have biological ties to North Korea: Korean-Americans who have family in the North. For too long Korean immigrants to the United States have been America's 'Silent Minority.' Not accustomed to political activism and awkward in a strange culture and language, first-generation Korean-American leaders have done little to promote their community's interests in America's political arena. As a result, few politicians pay attention to Korean-Americans or their unique needs. Because Korean-Americans are almost politically invisible, one of the greatest humanitarian tragedies of the 20th Century has been permitted to continue scarcely noticed. That tragedy is the 'divided families of America,' the Americans of Korean descent, who have not heard from their loved ones in more than fifty years. To date, no viable government program exists to help them make contact with their relatives in North Korea.

One of the greatest human rights violations of the Cold War era was the partitioning of Korea at the 38th parallel. While it can be argued that neither the United States or the former Soviet Union intended the division to be a permanent one, hundreds of thousands of Koreans on both sides of the line have not heard news of their parents, spouses, siblings or children for more than half a century. Like it or not, America should shoulder its share of the responsibility for this tragedy. To insure that our advocacy for rights gains a serious hearing, policy towards North Korea should focus, at least in part, on resolving this tragedy. Until the US government makes divided families as important an issue along with terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the perception that Americans of Koran descent are second-class citizens of this great country will be reinforced, particularly among East Asians. This is especially true of our long-time enemy, North Korea.

To give further credence to North Korea's misinterpretation of America's true nature, for the past few years, the US government has spent millions in an attempt to recover the remains of American servicemen who were killed in the North in the Korean War. Please understand me. I wholeheartedly support this effort to give closure to the relatives of those brave souls who lost their lives so many years ago. As someone who is somewhat familiar with the complexities of our political system, moreover, I also understand why the remains of our war dead have received major attention and funding while America's divided families have languished in neglect. Still, American policy towards North Korea should address this glaring contrast that many East Asians wrongly believe reflects entrenched racially-motivated priorities in American society and government.

5. Practice True Separation of Church and State

Seeking to address concerns shared with North Korean citizens should not ignore what is unique to America's own beliefs about the relationship of religion to the state. Demonstrating with actions just what religious freedom really means is one of the best ways to promote religious freedom in North Korea. North Korea, as well as other societies, needs to be challenged to re-think its perception that religion is a handmaiden of the state. Two measures will drive this challenge home:

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Forbid American government representatives from participating in religious-like ceremonies associated with North Korea's cult of leadership. Demonstrating that America expects its representatives and citizens in foreign countries to enjoy religious freedoms teaches an important lesson. After all, fundamental to religious freedom as well as human rights is the freedom not to participate in state religion. When US government representatives attend these rites, more pressure to participate is put on ordinary Americans who visit the North and indirectly, on North Korea's on citizens.

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Thicken the 'firewall' between religious workers and intelligence organizations and encourage our ally, South Korea, to do the same. Faced with a dearth of 'human intelligence' on the North, some intelligence organizations have yielded to the temptation to use missionaries and other religious workers to collect intelligence. This violates our most basic tenets of religious freedom and makes it impossible for North Koreans to trust religious people. Above all else, we must make it absolutely clear that religion in America and South Korea are not simply other forms of anti-communism. To do less is to confirm age-old East Asian belief that religious institutions are legitimate instruments of state policy.

Conclusion

How might a policy that shifts away from pre-conditions for diplomatic recognition towards non-governmental concerns promote religiousfreedom in North Korea? Due to North Korea's antipathy for the United States, American policy, to be effective, must take a new approach.Unique situations require unique methods, and this is especially true of North Korea.

A policy that places emphasis on the legitimate needs of ordinary citizens of both our nations would identify the common ground with North Korea's traditional East Asian values and build trust. On the other hand, using western vocabulary and methods to confront the North on religious issues confirms North Korea's deepest suspicions about America's intentions towards their society and provokes religious persecution. Wherever possible we need to demonstrate how our values as a society compliment traditional Korean values, without sacrificing our most cherished ideals. North Korea might still be somewhat uneasy about this kind of American policy because it would lead to more contacts with the outside world. Still its leadership wouldfeel far less threatened and far more likely to risk a more open society. In conclusion, North Korea isfar more likely to respond positively to an invitation to join America in addressing the needs of ordinary people - including their right to religious freedom - than it will ever be if America continues to sit in judgment against its society from afar.

Stephen W. Linton, Ph.D

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